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It's simply never time for genocide

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By Alfred P. Doblin

I've been thinking about Orson Welles all week. "We will sell no wine before its time," Welles proclaimed as he savored a glass of Paul Masson wine. It is the perfect slogan for why the Bush administration overthrew Saddam Hussein: "It was time."

On Monday, I had the rare opportunity of spending almost an hour with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, as part of a group of editorial writers at a two-day briefing at the State Department. The agenda was filled with high-level officials, but Rice was the main attraction.

She was asked to address the issue of America's image in the wake of Abu Ghraib. Rice said the Bush administration has held people accountable for the abuse of prisoners. "We have had people who have been punished for Abu Ghraib," she said. The secretary added, "Bad things happen in democracies, too."

Given the scope of abuse in Abu Ghraib, that was an understatement. What was revelatory was what followed, an explanation of why the United States invaded Iraq.

"One is that the United States has had to do some difficult things and make some difficult decisions, not all of which were popular. And if you're too worried about how you will be viewed, then you won't make difficult decisions. For instance, it was simply time to take down Saddam Hussein's regime. It was time."

No apology for a lack of weapons of mass destruction, chemical weapons plants, uranium rods or even curtain rods - "it was time." I asked Democratic Sen. Jon Corzine what he thought of that explanation.

"That's what the rationale was from the beginning," he said. "The other stuff was just icing that they were putting on the cake because they were looking for an excuse that would give them the ability to do it."

Back at the State Department, it wasn't just Iraq that was on our minds. I asked Rice why the United States was waiting for U.N. resolutions to stop the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan. Since 2003, more than 180,000 people in Darfur have died and an estimated two million people have been displaced as pro-government militias have carried out massive genocide against Africans without U.S. intervention.. Rice said, "But, you know, sometimes you really do have to do things multilaterally. And it's kind of interesting that, on the one hand, the United States is unilateralist; but when something isn't resolved quickly, then people would like us to be unilateralist. This is one that we really do need (to do) multilaterally."

The United States unilaterally deposed Saddam for past crimes against humanity while current crimes against humanity - 180,000 dead and two million displaced people in Darfur - is not as compelling. It makes no sense.

Corzine said, "There is no question that independent American thought - including Colin Powell - believes this is genocide in the process and to sit there and verbalize that and not act is just an unacceptable response on the part of all of us."

Other State Department officials suggested new U.N. resolutions would staunch the killing; the French perhaps could enforce a no-fly zone over Darfur. Corzine wants boots on the ground now. Not necessarily U.S. troops, but NATO forces working with the African Union. He is concerned that Darfur could become the breeding ground for new anti-American terrorists.

"You put two million people into camps and let them bake there for two, three years in boring and inhospitable conditions in these refugee camps and people get mad. And they will respond with violence... I think we are creating some risk of setting up another group of disenfranchised individuals who would strategically push out and attack the United States."

What is the point of creating democracy in the Middle East if the United States turns a blind eye to the massive extermination of people in Africa? Rice was right: "Bad things happen in democracies."

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